

Public Health History – Food Quality

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Most of us eat food from grocery stores, restaurants and fast food stores today without ever considering its safety. But there are a host of people who are working daily to ensure our food is safe. From farmers, to harvesters, to packers, shippers and distributors – a lot of care goes into keeping our food free of bacteria, parasites and viruses that can cause illness.

It wasn't until the late nineteenth century that scientists discovered bacteria and its role in disease, and really began to understand the connection between contaminated food and illness. They saw a link between human and animal diseases and noticed that unsanitary conditions could contribute to disease. Now, 150 years later, poor personal hygiene is still one of the main causes of foodborne illness.

The discovery of the microorganisms that cause foodborne disease developed slowly. In 1857 English scientist William Taylor showed that milk could transmit typhoid fever. USDA veterinarian Daniel Salmon described a bacterium that was later named Salmonella. And in 1895 a Belgian bacteriologist first isolated the bacteria that causes botulism when 23 people became ill and three died after eating an uncooked, salted ham.

The first food safety regulations were enacted in Massachusetts in 1641 with the Meal and Fish Inspection Law. Its goal was to assure foreign traders that food products produced in the colony were high-quality. Most food was grown and produced locally, so local laws were adequate to deal with problems, but as the population began to grow and large cities developed, the food supply became more national, and nation regulation was needed.

In 1906 reports of unsanitary conditions in meatpacking plants, mislabeling and the use of poisonous preservatives and dyes in foods prompted the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Federal Meat Inspection Act. The Pure Food and Drug Act cracked down on misbranding, and the Federal Meat Inspection Act established sanitary standards and mandated inspection of animals before, during and after slaughter.

The laws were not perfect, and in 1938, Congress passed the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act (FDCA), which is still the primary force in regulating foods today.

The process of making our food safer will never be completed. Recent incidents of contaminated lettuce, green onions and peanut butter remind us that the system is not fail proof. But as technology and science improve, so will the quality and safety of our food.

Personal responsibility will always play a large role as well. With poor personal hygiene remaining one of the main causes of foodborne illness, public health staff must continue to work diligently to educate food service workers and the general public about safe food handling skills.

For more information on food safety call the Springfield-Greene County Health Department at (417) 864-1658.